

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 7, 2010

WASHINGTON, DC – Prior to the United Nation's "Alliance of Civilizations" gathering in Istanbul, Turkey April 6-7, the United States Commission on International Freedom (USCIRF) sent a letter to President Barak Obama urging him to raise the issue of religious freedom at the forum. The letter also asked that President Obama ensure that the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartolomew, the spiritual leader of almost 300 million Orthodox Christians, be welcomed as a participant.

The April 3 letter cited the USCIRF Commissioners' "deep concern" that, according to sources in Turkey, the Patriarch, who is a Turkish citizen and based in Istanbul, was not invited to the "Alliance of Civilizations," which was established by Spain and Turkey under the auspices of the United Nations.

The letter noted that representatives from nations singled out in the U.S. State Department report as among the world's most notorious religious rights abusers, including Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan, were expected to participate in this global gathering, making it an ideal forum for the United States to raise the issue of freedom of religion or belief.

"The Commission is disappointed that the Ecumenical Patriarch was not invited to the "Alliance of Civilizations" gathering. We noted with appreciation that President Obama raised the issue of religious freedom before Turkey's Parliament. We encourage the U.S. administration to continue to urge Turkey to end its inappropriate restrictions on religious communities and their freedoms," said Felice Gaer, chair of USCIRF.

The text of the letter follows:

April 3, 2009

The President  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom looks forward to working together with you to advance the protection of religious freedom around the world. I am writing today on behalf of the Commission to respectfully ask that you raise two important issues at the Alliance of Civilizations' Istanbul Forum. First, we urge you to raise religious freedom in a

prominent manner in both your public and private remarks at the Forum. Second, we urge you to ensure the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I is invited to the Istanbul Forum in his role as Ecumenical Patriarch.

The State Department recently publically named Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan as nations whose governments are culpable for particularly serious violations of religious freedom. Representatives from some of these nations will be attending the Istanbul Forum. Further, incorporated in the mission of the Alliance is improving inter-religious relations. The Forum therefore provides an ideal setting for confirming America's dedication to advancing the universal right to freedom of religion or belief, and discussing frankly the need for all states to meet their obligations to respect those universal rights and fundamental freedoms.

On behalf of USCIRF, an independent bipartisan federal commission, we also urge you to use your influence to ensure the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, who resides in Istanbul and is the spiritual leader of almost 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide, is invited to the Forum in his role as Ecumenical Patriarch. Indeed, that he has not been invited reflects the difficulties religious minorities face in Turkey. The Turkish state has consistently used convoluted regulations and undemocratic laws to confiscate—without opportunity for legal appeal or financial compensation—thousands of religious minority properties, particularly those belonging to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Greek Orthodox community under patriarchal jurisdiction. Turkey's policies have led to the decline—and in some cases, virtual disappearance—of some of these religious minorities on lands they have inhabited for millennia. Considering the global leadership that His All Holiness

Bartholomew I plays on interreligious dialogue and human rights, it is troubling that the organizers have not invited him to participate, so that attendees can benefit from his experience and perspective.

Mr. President, we appreciate your commitment to human rights and religious freedom, and wish you success during your trip.

Regards,

Felice D. Gaer  
Chair

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner or USCIRF country expert, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at [tcarter@uscirf.gov](mailto:tcarter@uscirf.gov) or (202) 523-3257.